Relational practices: the breeder experiences or builds his relationship with his beef cattle herd.

On farm surveys were conducted in France by INRA and in Brasil by Estadual Paulista Universitate on the reaction of beef suckling cattle to humans and handling. These reactions depend on deliberate relational practices and stockpeople behaviour towards the animals. They depend also on the stockpeople level of awareness towards these aspects of the work. Training is a powerful tool for inducing changes in stockpeople practices and behaviour.

In beef suckling production, herd sizes increase and the working time has become a critical resource. Managing efficiently this time near the animals is an important issue in the working organisation. Nevertheless, the human-animal relation remains critical for this production, in terms of animal welfare, production, and stockpeople comfort and safety. Many studies on this topic were performed in confined farms (dairy herds, pigs, veal calves…) but much less with animals kept on large pastures with reduced human contact.

Interdisciplinary research surveys were conducted by French INRA laboratories UMR Herbivores and UMR Territoires and by the Brazilian University Estadual Paulista on the responses of beef suckling cattle to human and handling. They showed that cattle reaction depends on deliberate choices of practices, stockpeople behaviour towards their animals and on their level of awareness about human-animal relationships. We observed a strong variation among relational practices of the stockpeople towards their animals. Some purposely built their relationship with their animals through positive interactions during watching and handling, move their animals calmly and choose their breeding animals according to temperament traits. Others just reported they lack time and show less concern towards these practices. Those choices are reflected in heifers behaviour tested by an unknown experimenter. More detailed and exploratory observations during weighing or veterinary treatments suggested that working would last less with stockpeople interacting more positively with their animals. Observed cattle vocalised less, showing less disturbance states. Untrained stockpeople used less positive interactions during handling procedures, but also more negative ones as the working time passed (lack of patience, tiredness). This would lead to more stressful animals. Training session for changing stockpeople attitude and relational practices can really improve animal welfare and work comfort and safety, targeting « One welfare » for humans and animals.

These pioneer studies will request further collaborations with different disciplines (ethology, animal husbandry, genetics, ergonomics, professional education…). They will target additional scientific knowledge about the development of human-animal relationships but also training methodologies to induce transformations in farmers’ practices.

Valorisation

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